

THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS SOCIETY IN CANADA  
WINNIPEG BRANCH

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AN ADDRESS

BY MR. JOHN W. DAFOE, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF THE  
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*The Winnipeg Branch of the League  
of Nations Society appreciates the kind-  
ness of Mr. J. W. Dafoe in giving per-  
mission to print and circulate the Address  
which he delivered at the Annual Meeting  
of the Society in Winnipeg on April 19,  
1927.*

DAVID CHRISTIE,  
*President.*

# THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

*An Address by Mr. John W. Dafoe*

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## ITS ESTABLISHMENT

It is one of the compensations of the newspaper calling that it often gives its practitioners the privilege of being eye-witnesses of events of high significance and importance. Much the most notable event that I have witnessed in my journalistic life was the birth of the League of Nations. The time was Saturday afternoon, February 14, 1919; the place the great hall of the French Foreign Office, Paris. In this room on that day there were assembled some seventy delegates to the Peace Conference; in the assemblage there were men of all colors, of all religions, representing some forty countries scattered over every continent. At the head of the table about which the delegates gathered, sat Premier Clemenceau of France; on his right President Wilson of the United States; on his left Lloyd George, Prime Minister of Great Britain.

The moment the Conference came to order, President Wilson rose to read the first draft of the covenant of the League of Nations, expounding its articles as he went along. It was a great moment in the history of humanity. President Wilson, in his voice and his bearing, showed his realization of the greatness of the event; he knew that the eyes of the world, of history and of posterity were upon him. For him it was the crowning hour of life; everything afterwards was humiliation and defeat, ending in utter overthrow and disaster. Nevertheless, despite the catastrophe which attended his attempt to bring the United States into the League, it remains true that the world owes to President Wilson the existence of the League and all that it means to humanity. The plan, in its inception and execution, was largely British; and there were among the delegates idealists as devoted as President Wilson to the great conception of a league to keep peace—chief among them, Cecil and Smuts and Bourgeois—but only Wilson had the will and the power to compel the Peace Conference to make

the institution of the League an integral part of the Peace Treaty. Upon this point Wilson would not yield; and he had his way. The League is Wilson's memorial; and because of it, the world will never let his memory die.

#### ITS PURPOSE AND APPEAL

The League, in theory, was to take over an ordered world and then to keep it in order. But, owing to it being brought into being by the same body that fixed the terms of peace, it began to function at a time when post-war difficulties were at their acutest stage. The carrying out of the punitive and regulative features of the peace devolved, in fact, upon the Conference of Ambassadors representing the allied victorious powers, a circumstance that gave rise to misconceptions about the purpose of the League which still persist. The League was identified by many with this Conference of Ambassadors, which was natural enough, in view of the fact that the dominant powers in the Conference were also the permanent members of the League Council; and this gave the League the reputation of being the instrument by which the Great Powers gave effect to their post-war policies. Others differentiated between the two organizations to the disadvantage of the League, which they charged with leaving powers which it should exercise to a smaller *ad hoc* body serving selfish national interests. These disadvantages would have been avoided if the proposal, which President Wilson peremptorily vetoed, of having the League created by an international conference to follow the full settlement of post-war problems had been followed. But in that case would the League ever have come into being?

No institution ever built by human minds has made such an appeal as the League does to the hopes and hatreds of humanity. To countless millions it is a star of hope in a troubled sky; but to many it is an object of detestation. There are in particular three classes of people who loathe the League and dread the growth of its appeal. These are the believers in the old conception of the absolutist sovereignty of the state, with its creed of might makes right; those who want no palliatives for this world and look for a catastrophic end to the existing structure of society; and internationalist radicals in a hurry, who are enraged because the League has not developed

over-night into a super-state willing and able to put an end to various things they abhor, especially the persistency of nationalism.

The extraordinary diversity of opinion about the League and its functions has resulted in a wide range of criticism. Thus, much of the opposition to the League rests upon the charge that it is a super-state, with power to override the sovereign independence of nations; while even more bitter criticism has been directed against it because it is not a super-state with power to intervene to set things right all over the world. People find it hard to understand that the League is not a super-state with authority to impose its will upon the states composing it, but an organ for securing agreement between them in order that effect may be given to the purpose of the League as set out in the preamble to the covenant: "To promote international co-operation and to achieve international peace and security." To further these ends the contracting parties entered into certain engagements and provided machinery for co-operation; but in the absence of a will to co-operate there are no means by which the machinery can operate. The League is not an entity with its own power; it is a system by which states can act together if they will.

#### PUT TO THE TEST

The test of the League's vitality is the extent to which its members have lived up to the engagements into which they thus entered. The basic obligation of membership is to abstain from immediate war with one another, submitting the dispute either to arbitration or to enquiry by the Council. Much is heard about the little wars that have taken place, and this has been made a matter of reproach to the League; but of all these wars only two constituted clear breaches of the engagement by members of the League, under article XII, not to engage in war. These were Jugo-Slavia's invasion of Albania in 1921 and Greece's attack upon Bulgaria in 1925. In both cases, the Council met at the call of the chairman, intervened, stopped the fighting and found against the aggressors.

Italy's bombardment of Corfu in 1923 was found by a committee of jurists also to be a breach of the covenant, but

at the time Italy defended her course with the claim that where questions of national honor arise the limitations of the covenant do not apply. The Polish occupation of Vilna in 1920 was a disguised violation, owing to the Polish disavowal of the enterprise, though it is now known that it was directed from Warsaw. In both the Italian and Polish cases, the League was hampered in dealing with the question by the existence of the Conference of Ambassadors, which claimed and exercised the power to adjust post-war tangles. This record is not wholly satisfactory; but, considering the mental state of the European peoples following the war, it must be regarded, on the whole, as encouraging.

The principle of arbitration before fighting, under League auspices, has been applied often enough in the last six years to establish its usefulness. "The League," in the opinion of Sir Arthur Salter, one of its high officials, "has averted hostilities in some half-dozen cases." Instances are the settlement of the Aaland dispute between Sweden and Finland, the adjustment for the time being of the Silesia difficulty, the solution of the Memel problem, and, most striking of all, the judgment in the Mosul case, which composed serious differences in which there was a possibility of war between Great Britain and Turkey. This was of exceptional importance in establishing the principle that where nations agree to arbitration the finding is binding. In this case, Turkey, after holding the view that it need not conform to the judgment of the committee of the Council, accepted the judgment of the permanent court that it had no option. It may be reasonably held that, as the result of the experiences of the past six years, no nation which is a member of the League will lightly embark on hostilities with another member in violation of the obligations of the covenant.

#### WEAK POINTS REVEALED

The weakness of the League is that, in the event of a violation of the covenant under certain conditions, no way may be found to work the machinery, owing to the provision requiring unanimity in any plan calling for the application of sanctions. The Council acted promptly when Jugo-Slavia and Greece ignored the obligations of Article VIII, but dealt very gingerly

with Poland, which had a powerful friend in the Council in France, and with Italy, which is a permanent member of the Council. It is possible that a breach of Article X or a repudiation of the requirements of Article XII might deadlock the Council, thus making it impossible for it to make the recommendations necessary to concerted action to check and discipline the aggressor. What if the aggressor should be itself a member of the Council? Which is conceivable, in view of the principles of statecraft now openly avowed by one of the permanent members of the Council.

An amendment, approved by the Assembly in 1921, provides that, where members of the Council are parties to a dispute, their votes will not be necessary to provide the unanimity necessary to action; and it is generally assumed that the procedure thus outlined will be followed in the event of these circumstances arising. It is the fact, however, that the amendment has not yet been validated; and, under the original text of the covenant, it is, theoretically at least, within the power of any great nation to deadlock the machinery of the League. It must, further, not be forgotten that members of the League do not forego the right of making war; they can live up to their obligations under the covenant and yet appeal ultimately to the sword.

These weaknesses are inherent in the scheme and are not eradicable by changing the wording of the covenant, as experience has already shown; the remedy must be sought elsewhere.

#### THE NEW ATMOSPHERE

The effect that the lack of absolute security against war has upon the mentality of the shell-shocked nations has been strikingly revealed in the unavailing efforts to date to make progress with the engagement to provide some scheme for the reduction of armaments as set forth in the covenant. Committees have been working on this for years, but the plans successively proposed—the Treaty of Mutual Assistance and the Protocol—have met with shipwreck. The committees are still working, but the news about disarmament that comes to us is mostly about how impossible it is for the parties to the enquiry to agree. France posed the problem in the 1924



assembly—absolute security must precede disarmament. Hence the suggested protocol, wildly acclaimed by the Assembly, but unacceptable to the sober second thoughts of many of the member nations, especially Great Britain.

The protocol met the difficulty by theoretically "closing the gaps in the covenant." It met, so far as words went, the three requirements stipulated by the French—"arbitration, security and disarmament." But it transformed the whole spirit of the League and the methods of voluntary co-operation by which it was pledged to do its work, replacing it with an iron-clad scheme of compulsory arbitration and enforced judgments, which proved to be much more popular with European militarists intent on preserving the spoils of victory intact than with liberals who look forward to a world which is free from war because it is the will of its peoples that it shall be so.

The League has perforce had to fall back on less heroic methods. The Locarno pact applies in modified form the principle of the Treaty for Mutual Assistance; and, in so far as it lends to strengthen the feeling of security, may help forward the projects of partial disarmament now being considered by the Preparatory Commission of the League.

Experience, despite some untoward incidents, tends to confirm the belief of the founders of the League that, given a means for co-operation, the nations will make an effort to live up to the obligations which, in the mood of idealism, they took upon themselves at Paris. The examples of the past six years show, writes Sir Arthur Salter, an official of the League, "How great is the difference between the policy a country would pursue if left alone from that which it can be induced to follow under the influence of corrective opinion."

The League, if it is to live and flourish, must develop an international mind in its members, and there is abundant evidence that this is being done—slowly, too slowly, yet sufficiently to give grounds for hope. "The whole atmosphere of the League," says Lord Balfour, who has taken part in many of its deliberations, "tends to make the separate nations of which it consists more conscious that, in spite of all their differences, they have common interests and common duties and share common life." To this may be added the very recent judgment of Sir Austen Chamberlain, who has repre-



sented Great Britain on the Council of the League during the past three years:

"The more I go to the meetings at Geneva, the more I feel that much of our rivalries is artificial, that many of the suspicions which still trouble the relations of the nations and the world are unfounded, and that with patience, courage, and with good will we can solve—as we ought to solve—by friendly agreement the many problems with which we are confronted."

The development of this atmosphere and the building up of an international consciousness are helped by the ceaseless activities of the League. The Assembly meets once a year, the Council quarterly; the Permanent Court is beginning to be found useful; the secretariat is always on the job; so is the Labor office; while the various international organizations dealing with a wide variety of problems—finance and economics, transit, health, armaments, mandates, intellectual co-operation, opium and narcotics, traffic in women—meet with such frequency and regularity that Geneva is forever drawing people from all parts of the world and sending them home again to become, almost without exception, advocates of the League idea.

"In these six years," says a writer, "some thousands of persons, no small proportion of those who throughout the world are forming and executing the policy which determines international relations, have learnt, in regular co-operation with those of corresponding position in other countries, the international point of view." A notable illustration is the world economic conference which is to open on May 4, 1927. The preparatory commissions, upon which economists from all parts of the world have served, have been at work for more than a year; and their reports and recommendations are now to be considered by an international gathering. Its particular business is to consider, in the light of the information gathered, the economic plight of Europe, its causes and possible remedies. It is impossible to foretell the possible blessings to a distracted world which may result from this enquiry.

#### CANADA AND THE LEAGUE

There are very special reasons why Canadians should rejoice in that the League of Nations is in being and that this

country has from the outset been a sympathetic and active participant in its activities.

Canada's charter membership in the League, by reason of her representation in the Peace Conference, has had a notable reaction on our national development: on the one hand endowing us with a sense of nationality that would have been long in coming by the slow processes of domestic evolution, and, on the other hand, training us to see that modern nationalism does not mean isolation but includes, as a primary obligation, the duty of international co-operation. It has dowered us with both the national and the international mind.

Canada has played a useful and honorable part in the deliberations of the League; and a wider field for co-operation may be opened by membership in the Council, which there is reason to believe will in the near future be open to her if she chooses to assume the responsibilities which go with this position. There is no real question of Canada's right to membership in the Council, though it has been questioned in some quarters. Sir Robert Borden brought home from Paris, it will be remembered, a memorandum recognizing this right signed by Clemenceau, Wilson and Lloyd George; at the 1926 session of the Assembly, Sir Geo. Foster, Canada's senior delegate, formally asserted Canada's right, if she chose, to seek election to this body.

#### THE FUTURE OF THE LEAGUE

The truest way to estimate the worth of the League is to try to imagine what its disappearance, with all its subsidiary and co-ordinate organizations, would mean to the world. It is not seven years old; but is it not already indispensable? It commends itself to all those who are brought into touch with its spirit. Public men, hardened in their faith in pre-war systems, cannot resist the penetrating atmosphere at Geneva. They go to scoff; join in worship; and return home missionaries. This experience has been almost universal.

The League is needed for the moral encouragement of humanity in a time of confusion and dejection. "It will help us and help humanity," says Gen. Smuts, "to keep afloat in the dark seas through which we are now voyaging." It is needed for the countless services, international in character,

which it alone is equipped to give the world. It is needed because it exerts a pervading and often silent influence which tends to make the practices of national selfishness and ruthlessness odious to world public opinion. As Gilbert Murray says, "It has the power to appeal patiently to the morality of the civilized world." It is needed for the purposes for which it was called into being.

The strongest case that can be made for the League is, to repeat the deliberate statement of Lord Grey, that if the League had been in being the Great War, in his opinion, would have been averted. The peoples of the world who are the sufferers from wars will not willingly permit the destruction of an agency which might have saved them from that immeasurable tragedy and may save them from its repetition in still more terrible forms.

The issue may indeed still be in doubt. But by every year that passes, by every difficulty surmounted, by every service rendered, the League roots itself deeper and firmer in the world's structure; and if by patience, by courage and by the support and sympathy of people everywhere it can endure for a few more years until a younger generation, free from the old obsessions, comes everywhere into the control of events, war will take its place with other superstitions which the human race, in its march to the heights, has cast aside.

